



Civic Scholars Council Courageous Citizenship Papers

From Programs to Politics

Ben Fink*

This paper is part of a [collection](#) of papers commissioned by [Braver Angels' Citizen Scholars Council](#) for discussion at the inaugural Council Symposium, held in Philadelphia on June 25, 2026, before the Braver Angels Convention.

The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what “courageous citizenship” is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: “We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: “I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America's civic culture.”

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Abstract

For civic organizations like Braver Angels, moving effectively from hosting debates, workshops, and dialogue sessions (programs) to catalyzing citizen-led change in members' communities (politics) will require a major cultural shift. It will require the organization to take serious stock of its members' actual interests, determining not what they should care about but what they actually do; to analyze the root of communities' challenges in class, power, and exploitation; and to develop a language and methodology that welcomes residents whose most immediate concerns are less "democratic decline" or "toxic polarization" and more "how do I pay my rent."

"No matter how big the company is, we workers are stronger — when we're united!" Thus shouted then 104-year-old (now 107-year-old) Bea Lumpkin, to a crowd of striking Chicago Starbucks workers in 2023 ([Wood](#)). Her words, to say nothing of her age, were inspiring but hardly original. To achieve liberty and justice for all, we must come together and resist those who would divide us: this is an age-old truth that I always took for granted, until I went to a philanthropy conference.

In the Hilton Chicago, at the 2024 gathering of the Council on Philanthropy, I found a debate was raging between what they called "bridging" and what they called "equity," which the funders present considered mutually exclusive. The logic: "bridging" requires working with people we disagree with, which inevitably means diluting and compromising on what we're fighting for. "Equity," on the other hand, requires taking an uncompromising stand for the oppressed, which necessarily means dismissing those who don't. Rather than attempt to counter this fallacy in the abstract, I found an appropriate moment to share a story:

You might not know much about the Naugatuck Valley of Connecticut. Most people in Connecticut don't, either. But I've done a lot of work there, as well as in Appalachia, and I'll tell you the Naugatuck Valley is basically Appalachian Connecticut. Drive down Route 8 from Waterbury toward Bridgeport, and you might think you're in West Virginia. The economy is the same, too, except in West Virginia they had coal, and in the Naugatuck Valley they had brass. Brass mills, in small towns up and down the river, good union jobs, multi-ethnic working-class communities. Then in the nineties all the factories shut down. The economy tanked. The jobs disappeared. It's now the Reddest part of the state. The housing organizing work we do in the Valley includes people across the political spectrum, because almost everyone's one missed payment away from losing their home.

Well recently, nearby in the city of New Haven, a bunch of low-income people of color were being unjustly evicted from their homes by a predatory landlord, who was also planning to build slum-like housing in some of the Valley towns. Their tenants' union was planning a march, and an organizer we knew was connected with them. He came to a local organizing meeting, explained the situation, and invited our people in the Valley to come. And so it was that three older white ladies from an exurban Connecticut town, at least one of whom had a Trump sign in front of her house, marched for tenants' rights alongside urban low-income people of color. And I defy anyone here to say that march was less powerful because they were there.

The gap between the halls of the Hilton and the streets of New Haven is the gap between pundits and people, between abstraction and reality, between purity and messiness. It is also the gap Braver Angels now faces. Braver Angels has built a network of local alliances across the country and made a name for itself as a producer of debates, dialogues, workshops, and other “bridging” programs for mostly professional-class participants looking to build understanding across divides. But the organization’s new strategic shift toward “courageous citizenship” signals a desire go beyond “bridging” — if not exactly into “equity,” a term both buzzy and Blue, then into the business of making effective change in the public sphere.



To risk grandiosity: in 1965 Bayard Rustin, one of the architects of the 1963 march on Washington (the March for Jobs and Freedom), found the civil rights movement in a similar place. Ten years of successful boycotts, sit-ins, and marches had shifted the national consciousness and led to the passage of landmark legislation. Rustin recognized if the movement was going to consolidate and extend its victories, it would need to move off the streets and into the halls of power, both in the institutions and in the community: in his words, it would need to move “from protest to politics” ([Rustin 1965](#)). Braver Angels, in a similar vein, is attempting to move from *programs* to politics.

Crossing this gap effectively will require a significant cultural shift. It will require connecting with people regular people, of all ages and races and classes and political positions — who don’t organize their lives around partisanship or news cycles; who don’t talk or think in terms like “tribalism” or “toxic polarization”; but who, when given the opportunity, will gladly work with neighbors across the street or across the country to help build a world where everyone has a voice and a chance.

This kind of cultural shift can be accomplished. But it cannot be accomplished without discomfort.

“Courageous Citizenship” and Its Limits

What is “courageous citizenship?” The new Braver Angels strategic plan explains:

Braver Angels exists to address this crisis at its root: the collapse of human connection across differences. We work to strengthen civic life before it fractures. Our solution is what we call courageous citizenship, an essential ingredient of a healthy republic. It means engaging one another with skill, courage, and dignity; choosing to act instead of react; and building together in community. It is a shared American identity. ([Braver Angels 2026:1](#))

This new approach signals a major change in the organization: going beyond talking into doing. If David Blankenhorn criticized the concept of “dialogue” for excluding “Reds” ([Blankenhorn 2018](#)), this document goes one crucial step further: recognizing how the focus on discourse-based workshops — debates, dialogues, depolarization — can exclude those outside of the

professional classes. (Consider who joins a debate team.) It could be read as aiming, if only implicitly, to open the organization to poor, working-class, and middle-class people into cross-partisan work by inviting them into doing or making something that matters to them — with an end goal not merely of cross-partisan understanding and civility, but of materially helping our country out of peril (see [Anderson 2024](#)).

If this is indeed the goal — and I, for one, am hoping it is — the new strategic plan takes an important step, but also falls short. “Courageous citizenship” may be about doing something rather than just talking, but the description of what that something is — “building together in community” — remains unhelpfully vague.

Consider Rustin’s counterexample. He summed up the needed movement “from protest to politics” as follows: “A conscious bid for *political power* is being made, and in the course of that effort a tactical shift is being effected: direct-action techniques are being subordinated to a strategy calling for the building of community institutions or power bases” ([Rustin 1965](#), emphasis in original). That is: get off the streets, where your actions are temporary, and go consolidate your power into durable organizations of, by, and for the community. He continued: “Self-help efforts, directly or indirectly, must be geared to mobilizing people into power units capable of effecting social change. That is, their goal must be genuine self-help, not merely self-improvement” ([Rustin 1965](#)).

The Braver Angels strategic plan appears to push the organization in a similar direction, for similar reasons: “Strengthen and modernize local alliances so they are well-supported, well-equipped, and consistently effective as community-based centers for courageous citizenship and collaborative action” ([Braver Angels 2026:10](#)). But as it stands, the Braver Angels formation lacks Rustin’s passion, drive, and clarity. Rustin specifies a clear (if imprecise) goal of “effecting social change” and “genuine self-help” and points to the need to build “power units capable of” doing it; it is a sharp and passionate challenge to the status quo, including the status quo within his own movement. Currently, the Braver Angels formulation leaves a central question unanswered: what are we acting together to do, and why does it matter?

To be clear, Braver Angels clearly sees the need for change. The strategic plan begins: “The United States is facing a civic crisis....Toxic polarization and contempt have become civic reflexes, leaving too many Americans trapped between withdrawal and tribal warfare” ([Braver Angels 2026:1](#)). It’s just unclear about how it can help effect this change. The key sentence is further down the first page: “A culture that honors courageous citizenship is essential to counter the industrial outrage complex that divides us today” ([Ibid.](#)).

We are not naturally or preternaturally divided, Braver Angels asserts. Rather, we have *been* divided, by separate entity — not part of either “side” — that wishes neither “side” well. This analysis sits well within the history of American racial, regional, religious, cultural, and political polarization: when working people are divided along such lines, to invoke Bea Lumpkin at the Starbucks picket, it is not any of them but the boss who benefits. The boss, in this case, is called “the industrial outrage complex”: presumably the wealthy and well-connected interests that profit from the outrage and suffering of “Reds” and “Blues” alike. To discover who those interests are and how they can be influenced, reformed, and/or defeated — and to organize

Braver Angels alliances to act on this analysis — would be a courageous civic collaboration indeed.

But the strategic plan doesn't go there. Its remaining sixteen pages do not discuss the "industrial outrage complex" further, nor do they spend much time exploring what local alliances of courageous citizens could do to effect change. Instead, it concerns itself with the managerial mechanics of how these groups will be built and grown. The result, intentional or not, is a prefigurative and passive approach to change: it doesn't matter what those groups of courageous citizens *do*; it just matters that they *exist*. Absent a clearer strategy, this approach runs the risk of building not local organizations with the power to make change, but less-than-courageous citizen clubs, reminiscent of the debate and dialogue clubs that came before them.

Braver Angels, in other words, finds itself gazing out across the gap between programs and politics — but it has not yet crossed it. To do so would require (1) assessing members' self-interest, (2) taking seriously the cross-partisan discontent with a vastly unequal status quo, and (3) stepping outside professional-class culture to connect with the courageous work already happening in every community.

1. Self-Interest

From the perspective of the populist community and labor organizing traditions that shaped Rustin's work (as well as my own), the first step toward crossing the gap between programs and politics is asking whether Braver Angels' members want to cross it at all.

This is a question of *self-interest*, defined in this organizing tradition not as selfishness or greed, but as *what drives a person to act* (see [Chambers 2004:44-54](#); [Fink 2020:26-31](#)). There are many more worthy actions in the world than any one person can ever take, and more worthy projects than any one person can get involved in: a person's self-interest is the sum total of the desires, feelings, stories, and values that cause them to take the actions they do and get involved in the projects they get involved in. To act effectively with our fellow citizens requires understanding both their self-interest and our own, and discovering what elements of self-interest we share — what "is between" (or in Latin: "inter-est") ([Arendt 1958:182](#)).

If most current Braver Angels members joined during the period before the current strategic plan and the shift toward "courageous citizenship," when debates, dialogues, and other clean-cut programming were the order of the day, then they likely joined because they wanted to do those things. Doing something different — specifically, leaving the cozy confines of the workshop room and getting their hands dirty in the broader community — may or may not be in their self-interest. Making the shift from programs to politics, then, could be like telling the members of a golf club that now they're going to play tennis instead. It's possible some may like it, but it's not what they signed up for. On the other hand, it may be exactly what they wanted, and up until now they've been dissatisfied. Either way, a serious and non-judgmental assessment of the self-interest of Braver Angels members, perhaps through a campaign of *one-to-one relational meetings* — another core concept of community organizing (see [Chambers 2004:44-54](#); [Fink 2020:26-31](#)) — could be a valuable exercise.

If significant self-interest to work courageously as citizens in the broader community is indeed discovered, a second question of self-interest will then arise: namely, what courageous work to start doing, as citizens in the broader community? The Braver Angels Citizen-Led Solutions team offers this recommendation: “start with a clear presenting issue that is currently dividing the community (for example, affordable housing or school curriculum)” ([Braver Angels 2024:7](#)).

Judging from my own experience, they are half right. Starting local is key: even if a group has national ambitions, if it is to draw broad support from its community, it must start by doing work that neighbors recognize as worth their time and effort, which means addressing local wants and needs. But starting with a high-stakes divisive issue would be a serious error. For that a group needs trust, credibility, and numerous and diverse participants. It is more effective to start with low-stakes, uncontroversial projects that will provide relatively easy wins; then when they’re ready, the group can move into tougher territory. The cross-partisan organization I helped build in the Appalachian coalfields, which eventually built the largest solar energy project in East Kentucky’s history, started by reviving community square dances and bluegrass concerts (see [Fink 2020:29, 32-35](#)).

2. Organized Exploitation

As I was getting my bearings in Kentucky, I asked an elder colleague what our boundaries were: is there anyone in the community we would *not* work with? He answered without hesitation: “The question is, where do you stand on organized exploitation?” ([Fink 2020:29](#)).

It didn’t matter where people stood on coal, guns, religion, Trump, or any of the other hot-button issues currently dividing the community; we would (and did) work with people on all sides. But there was one issue where we drew the line — a line not between left and right, but between top and bottom (see [Fink 2024](#)). More precisely: between the vast majority of the people and the very small minority that was actively seeking to rob everyone else of the value of their land and labor. The new Braver Angels strategic plan points in this same direction: history shows those who make up the “industrial outrage complex” are generally also the people in favor of “organized exploitation.” Or, again as per Bea Lumpkin: those who seek to divide us are usually also the ones seeking to conquer us.

Drawing such a line has nothing to do with partisanship. One of my closest allies was an infamously outspoken local Republican leader who used to run a strip mine and was now the chief of his neighborhood’s volunteer fire department. It is unclear what his views on organized exploitation may have been back when he ran the strip mine, but by the time we met he was very clear about the need for corporations who extracted coal and natural gas from beneath people’s homesteads to compensate those people fairly. And conversely: a visiting coastal liberal, surprised and impressed by the queer youth culture in the county seat, assumed that was the center of local activism, as opposed to the more socially conservative hinterlands. “Actually,” I heard a local set her straight, “all the labor organizing happened up the hollers. The county seat is where management lived.”

Some might object that drawing *any* line is contrary to the spirit of Braver Angels. But *not* drawing any line runs what may be the bigger risk: implying that what one stands for is a wishy-washy, mushy-middle status quo. This is the impression often given by the plethora of

“bridging” organizations favored by elite philanthropy today, with their vague buzzwords and sleek, interchangeable red, white, and blue logos: that what they really want is for everyone just to go back to trusting Big Government, Big Business, and other experts and established institutions with long track records of harming the people of Red and Blue America alike.

In a move toward courageous citizenship, this will not do. There are residents of East Kentucky, the Naugatuck Valley of Connecticut, and every other community in which I’ve organized that are ready to work across partisan divides to resist their common exploiters, but the reality of that exploitation must be acknowledged.

3. Class Culture and Affirmation

Back in 1965, Rustin observed:

[F]rom the point of view of motivation, some of the healthiest Negro youngsters I know are juvenile delinquents: vigorously pursuing the American Dream of material acquisition and status, yet finding the conventional means of attaining it blocked off, they do not yield to defeatism but resort to illegal (and often ingenious) methods. They are not alien to American culture. (Rustin 1965)

One time I brought a grassroots leader, who had spent years dealing drugs in order to feed her family, to a conference about entrepreneurial development. Most of the people at the conference were government and nonprofit professionals. When the facilitator listed the traits of a successful entrepreneur and asked everyone to think of people they knew who fit this description, the audience appeared stumped — except for the leader I’d brought, who jumped up enthusiastically and said: “I know lots of people like that! They’re the drug dealers!”

She was not asked back.

The tone and language of “bridging” organizations, no less than their logos, can feel pious and sanitized; the work of courageous citizens cannot be. If we are to overcome those who would divide and conquer us, we need to connect with people whose language, habits, perspectives, and reference points might seem strange, off-putting, even distasteful. But however unorthodox their approach might be, as Rustin suggests, they are often the truest believers of all. When I organize in a Red-leaning southern place, I will often preempt people’s preconceptions about me by referring to myself as a “communist Jew from the northeast.” The only people who don’t laugh are the liberals.

The humorlessness is a symptom of a deeper cause: the failure to affirm our fellow citizens as they are, before asking them to change. In my work as a facilitator and consultant, I will often encourage clients to apply what I call the Creepy Test: if you said *to* a person in your community what you say *about* them in your likeminded professional circles, would it be creepy? For example, imagine saying to a neighbor, “You know, you are very tribal in your outlook. You need to depolarize from within.” That might get us a slug in the face, and it’s just as disrespectful when said behind people’s backs. It suggests we look at our neighbors as deficient for the ways they are not like us. Then we wonder why they do not like us.

It is a truism of community organizing that we can never organize a community from scratch: we start by identifying the places in which that community is already organized, then work with the people there to grow, strengthen, and connect those existing ties. Those places, sometimes called “community centers of power” ([Fink 2020:31-36](#)), look different in every community. They can exist within houses of worship, community centers, cultural organizations, schools, local businesses, and neighborhood associations. (There are also many examples of each of these organizations that are decidedly *not* community centers of power, but rather closed clubs, cliques, petty tyrannies, or top-down service providers.)

In a community’s centers of power, acts of cross-partisan courageous citizenship may happen every day. These acts will be expressed in the community’s own culturally-specific language, which again, may be foreign and even discomfiting. One such center in Kentucky, a former grade school turned into a community center by local volunteers, includes loving memorials to military veterans and union leaders, rainbow colored signs welcoming queer neighbors (someone once took those signs down; the center’s director publicly threatened to shoot anyone who did it again), and several placards that read:

And the second *is* like *namely* this, **Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.**

There is none other commandment greater than these. — Mark 12:31

NO EXCEPTIONS!

Among the first tasks of a Braver Angels alliance seeking to engage in such work must be to locate and connect with these centers. Before proposing any new programming or alterations to their program — whatever flaws and shortcomings the center may have — it is essential to affirm the worth, value, and beauty of the community’s culture, and of the work that is already being done.

Conclusion: Crossing the Class Gap

In the organizational cultural shift necessary to cross the gap from programs to politics — to build alliances that do not just talk and analyze but can also effectively act together to make change — bridging the divide between Red and Blue may be less central than bridging the divide between the professional-class culture that has dominated the organization so far, with its emphasis on trusting institutions and reasoning from abstract concepts, and the more concrete, group-based, and institution-distrusting cultures of the poor, working-class, and middle-class people who make up the majority of every community — except the gated ones.

Bridging this class divide cannot be accomplished through programs alone; it must be accomplished by professional-class participants meeting poor, working-class, and middle-class people where they are at and working on matters of shared self-interest, even when that means doing work (like reviving square dances and bluegrass concerts) that feels nothing like a depolarization workshop or issue debate. It will likely feel uncomfortable at first. It will also soon feel surprisingly fulfilling, as alliance members discover common ground and common purpose and allies they never knew they could have, from all points on the political spectrum.

As citizens work and build trust together across class divides, they will discover more and more that they have in common — including the many ways in which they are, in fact, threatened by the same organized exploiters, who seek to keep them divided and conquerable, along with the rest of the country. That is when the real work can start.

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* Ben Fink has organized cross-cultural community networks in the Kentucky coalfields, the suburbs of Connecticut and New Jersey, and the urban centers of Baltimore and Minneapolis-St. Paul, as well as his hometown of Philadelphia. He holds a Ph.D. in cultural studies from the University of Minnesota. In 2020 he was recognized by Time Magazine as one of "27 People Bridging Divides Across America."